

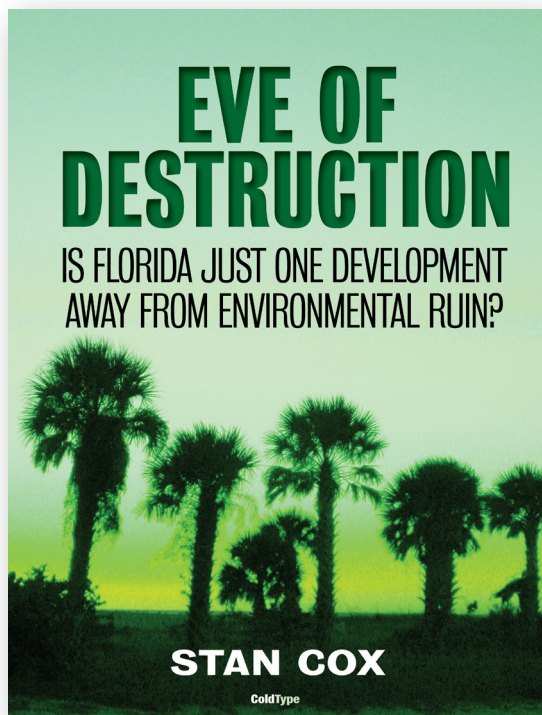
EVE OF DESTRUCTION

IS FLORIDA JUST ONE DEVELOPMENT
AWAY FROM ENVIRONMENTAL RUIN?

A row of palm trees silhouetted against a bright, hazy sunset sky. The trees are of varying heights and are positioned across the lower half of the frame.

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The monumental stone signs and freshly paved entry road appear to lead to nothing but wide-open, semitropical countryside. But a second look reveals a skyline of sorts on the horizon, and it's topped by a beige-and-brown, sharply arched roof. That turns out to be a 100-foot-tall church known as the Oratory, which sits at the core of downtown Ave Maria, Fla.

The new town is situated in a semi-agricultural part of Collier County, 30 miles northeast as the gull flies from the beaches of Naples – the state's southwesternmost resort area. But with its narrow, curving streets, cobblestones, quaint architecture, fresh stucco and paint, and (on a recent Tuesday afternoon) almost total absence of any human presence, Ave Maria appears to be a village in some unidentifiable European nation that has just endured an all-out attack by an enemy armed only with neutron bombs and power washers.

Facing the Oratory is the gleaming Ave Maria University, and clustered around



Much of the controversy surrounding Ave Maria has focused on the question of how it can simultaneously be a Catholic enclave and a governmental unit

the town center are streets lined by densely packed houses. Stubs of yet-to-be-built streets lead off in all directions, but most of the 8 square miles owned by the town remain open land.

Ave Maria is the creation of Domino's Pizza tycoon and prominent conservative Catholic Tom Monaghan, who teamed up with the Barron Collier Co. (the latter founded in the 1920s by the region's original big-time developer). In addition to the university, the town plan calls for 11,000 residences of various sizes, 690,000 square feet of retail space, 400 hotel rooms, two schools and two golf courses.

Much of the controversy surrounding Ave Maria has focused on the question of how it can simultaneously be a Catholic enclave and a governmental unit. But Ave Maria is also the most recent and most striking incarnation of south Florida's most persistent problem: Overdevelopment.

Agribusiness, led by Big Sugar, once posed the greatest threat to south Flori-

da's ecosystems. The long struggle to save the Everglades from agricultural and urban growth on the state's southeast coast – a struggle that is far from over – has been thoroughly documented by Michael Grunwald in his 2006 book *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida and the Politics of Paradise*.

Now the chief threat to lower Florida's remaining natural lands comes from residential developments like Ave Maria and the tentacles of transportation and commerce that feed them. As Grunwald and others have shown, local governments and developers in southwest Florida are creating new environmental crises faster than the past mistakes made on the other side of the state can be corrected.

Historian Gary Mormino of the University of South Florida up the west coast in St. Petersburg, looks at the low-lying, automobile- and air-conditioning-dependent peninsula where he lives and sees a state that's extremely vulnerable to coming climatic changes and energy shortages: "Florida is a kind of brave new world in the 21st century. And we haven't arrived very well prepared."

What's more, in his 2005 social history of modern Florida, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, Mormino concluded that "the Florida of today is the America of tomorrow." If he's right, we'd better pay closer attention to the paving and building that's going on down at our continent's soggy tail end.

Long-Run Biology

Six million years ago, South Florida was covered by a shallow sea. Then the state's original land-developers – microscopic marine organisms – went to work. Their calcium-rich remains gradually built up a solid limestone floor, and large parts of that floor rose into the sunshine from time



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to time as sea levels fluctuated over the past 100,000 years.

The southern part of the state remains part dry, part wet. Here, the collection of extraordinary ecosystems collectively known as the Everglades are sustained by vast sheets of fresh water that creep continuously and imperceptibly south across the entire lower peninsula.

But over the past century, thanks to encroachment from the coasts and farming in the interior, the Everglades is down to half its original size. In the state's southwestern counties – including Lee and Collier, which, respectively, contain the coastal cities of Fort Myers and Naples – the natural system that's now endangered is very different from the more easterly "River of Grass" that has been under siege by Miami-area urbanization and sugarcane farming for so many years. The victim here is the Big Cypress Swamp – a vast, flat mosaic of cypress forests, wet prairies, pinelands and marshes. The culprit is growth: Collier County, which had a scant 16,000 inhabitants in 1960 and 86,000 in 1980, is now home to almost 350,000 people year-round – plus an additional 150,000 or so winter residents. Additional throngs of tourists converge on the area from December through February to soak up the warmth.

The Big Cypress Swamp's flora and fauna are just as sensitive to disruption of natural water flows and fragmentation of habitat as are those of the vast, grassy tracts of Everglades to the east. To date, most attention has been focused on the region's most charismatic inhabitant, the Florida panther. The big cats require large, undisturbed ranges (100 to 400 square miles for one animal), and their numbers have been thinned severely by the spread of human activity across the landscape. But the panther's plight is only one highly

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visible indicator of much broader ecological degradation.

In South Florida, problems often have a way of coming down to a matter of water. The region leads the nation in water use per person. The most heroic efforts to square the circle, to keep both the remaining natural lands and the accelerating commercial development of South Florida supplied with clean water, are doomed from the start. There simply is not enough to get around.

Short-Run Economics

Their famous can-do spirit intact, despite a real-estate market that was hit early and hard by the big pop of the national housing bubble, southwest Florida developers continue to demand the freedom to pave and build ever farther inland from the Gulf of Mexico and its bright-white beaches. Asked about the region's building boom in 2002, Al Hoffman, then-CEO of WCI Communities, told the Washington Post, "There's no power on earth that can stop it!" So far, no one has proved him wrong.

At the time of Hoffman's prophecy, WCI had done as much as any company to make Naples the second-fastest metro area in the country. Today, Hoffman is gone, WCI is in Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and board chairman Carl Icahn recently sold his 6 million company shares for a total of 2 cents (not 2 cents per share, just 2 cents).

The march of suburbia hasn't stopped, but it has slowed. And Florida's real-estate and construction barons are now clamoring for a healthy share of federal bailout money to get them through hard times.

Naples currently ranks 11th among 350 cities nationwide in mortgage foreclosures (Fort Myers just up the coast is No. 1); despite that, it's still in seventh place for



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population growth. It also has the second-highest per capita income in the nation, so there's plenty of cash in the system to help push roads and subdivisions into new territory. The Bonita Bay Group, a dominant force among developers in the region, saw its new home sales shoot up in the crash of 2008, exceeding 2007 sales by 38 percent.

Since the 1950s, when Northerners looking for a future home in the sun would shell out the widely advertised "\$10 down and \$10 a month" for southwest Florida swampland that might one day be dredged, drained and built upon, the region's energies have been focused on the manufacture of real estate. Writer John Rothchild put it best: "as Detroit must sell cars, Florida must sell property."

From 1980 to 2000, an average of 400 people per day moved out of Florida. Most of them, according to Mormino, were fed up with runaway growth and sprawl. But each day during those same years, 1,000 people moved into the state.

Whatever happens to the national economy, South Florida will march on in its pursuit of growth. The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, approved in 2000, is meant to save South Florida's ecosystems while keeping its humans supplied with water. But it emphasizes water supplies for cities and suburbs and gives mainly lip service to the natural hydraulic flow that keeps the Everglades alive. Based as it is on the assumption that the region's population will double by 2050, CERP faces an uphill battle, to say the least.

And it's not just living space that will be needed. Doubling the population will mean, at minimum, doubling the population of golfers. As of a year ago, Lee and Collier counties were already home to 152 golf courses — one of the densest concen-

trations of fairways in the country – and given the demand, space certainly could be made for 150 more.

The fast eastward creep of southwest Florida’s development is mirrored by continued inland creep from the state’s east coast. Grunwald wrote *The Swamp*, “In coming decades ... South Florida could become an uninterrupted asphalt megalopolis stretching from Naples to Palm Beach. Perhaps it could be called Napalm Beach.”

A Paler Shade of Green

Ave Maria is not hanging out there totally alone in eastern Collier County. It was preceded a century ago by the town of Immokalee, eight miles to the north. Lying amid orange groves and fields of tomatoes and other vegetables, Immokalee is home to 20,000 people, many of them immigrant agricultural workers. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has won headline-making victories in recent years, pushing Subway, Taco Bell and other fast-food chains to pay more for tomatoes. But the people who pick the tomatoes go home each day to trailer parks that present a shocking contrast to the condos and McMansions just over the horizon in Ave Maria.

Half of all mobile homes in the United States can be found in the southern half of Florida. Those occupied by well-heeled retirees can be quite luxurious, but the trailers in Immokalee are clearly unfit for human habitation. Clustered in dusty lots at the center of town or scattered around its fringes, the bare aluminum boxes have windows hardly bigger than slits, and many have no functioning air conditioner.

In contrast to Immokalee’s trailers, Ave Maria’s solid, climate-controlled properties are built atop a colossal earth-moving project that was needed to render the area



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suitable for building. Now, when the residents and students of Ave Maria go for a walk beyond their town limits, they have plenty of open countryside in which to wander. Having found a haven from Naples’ frenetic development to the east, and what Mormino calls “the other Florida” in Imokalee to the north, they will also be sheltered, as Ave Maria University advertises in its promotional literature, “against the windstorms of secularism and apostasy which seem to overwhelm our nation and our church.” (That lofty goal is reflected beautifully in the shape of the Oratory’s facade, which brings to mind ceremonial papal headgear).

Another town, to be called Big Cypress, will be located between Ave Maria and Naples. Still on the drawing board, it will include – just for a start – 9,000 residences, a 500-room hotel, ample shopping, schools, a 200-bed hospital and the requisite golf course. Between and surrounding the two new towns will remain some of the more ecologically important zones of the Big Cypress Swamp. And the towns, say developers and some environmental groups, will be pioneer settlements in a new era of green planning, meant to protect rather than degrade the region’s land- and waterscapes.

An order signed by Gov. Jeb Bush in 1999 urged Collier County to protect 200,000 acres of land in the Immokalee area by concentrating development in “urban villages,” “new towns” and “satellite communities” rather than on larger, traditional rural housing tracts. In 2002, a plan called the Rural Land Stewardship Area created a complex credit-trading system that allows developers to build on certain numbers of acres if they preserve other areas.

Some major environmental groups have endorsed the county’s plans to al-

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low dense settlements in the Big Cypress region. One Audubon of Florida representative told the press, “People will look back a decade from now, and we’ll have protected a million acres of land based on this model, and we’ll say, ‘It all started right there in Immokalee.’”

But others have sounded alarms over the environmental impact. I asked Ellen Peterson, who chairs the Sierra Club’s Calusa Group in southwest Florida, if the region’s self-styled “green” developers like Barron Collier and the Bonita Bay Group have earned the plaudits they’ve received from major environmental groups, including Audubon International.

Peterson has no faith in developer-led conservation: “You can’t put people close to panthers and not end up killing panthers. And anytime there is increasingly dense development around water, you get runoff of fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals.” The economic and ecological costs of the vast infrastructure needed to support new housing developments, she said, turn out to “far exceed the one-time environmental impact fee that developers pay.”

Land preservation can take strange forms in Collier County. After the county commission purchased a 2,500-acre former ranch last fall under a program called Conservation Collier, it began weighing the possibility of allowing recreational all-terrain vehicle use on the property. The program’s acquisition director said the property, “will be used for all sorts of things the Conservation Collier ordinance allows ... which is quite a bit.”

In December, there surfaced a map illustrating the potential for “build-out” into the Rural Land Stewardship Area that has been designated in eastern Collier County. On the map, a large portion of the RLSA is peppered with 22 black ovals designating “development areas” laced together by



The effect is reminiscent of the most tortuously gerrymandered legislative districts, or perhaps Israeli maps of a vision for the West Bank. Ostensibly development-free parts of the RLSA are cut by six-lane thoroughfares that will take residents in to Naples, Fort Myers and Bonita Springs on the coast

four- and six-lane roadways and bypassed by a few “panther corridors.” The effect is reminiscent of the most tortuously gerrymandered legislative districts, or perhaps Israeli maps of a vision for the West Bank. Ostensibly development-free parts of the RLSA are cut by six-lane thoroughfares that will take residents in to Naples, Fort Myers and Bonita Springs on the coast.

Published on the *Naples Daily News* web site, the map was applauded by some environmental groups but eyed with deep suspicion by others. The Conservancy of Southwest Florida was swift with its negative reaction. Conservancy spokeswoman Nicole Ryan told me that most of the stewardship area is the property of a half-dozen large landowners who contracted with a private firm to come up with a way of building new subdivisions that would be acceptable to the county commission. The map, she says, illustrates the principle that, “When a plan is drawn up at the developers’ request, it will be done to their benefit.”

The area’s mainstream environmental organizations gave up long ago on trying to call a total halt to encroachment on undeveloped lands. “We know there will be growth,” Ryan said. “Florida has landowner-friendly property-rights laws that allow one housing unit for every 5 acres, and you can’t take that right away in this state.” She says the new strategy of clustering development isn’t as bad – at least theoretically – as having development spread uniformly across the county.

But as plans have evolved, the amount of landscape to be built up has already almost tripled, and that, says Ryan, is certain to disrupt panther habitat and much more. Planners can call as loudly as they want for nice-sounding elements like villages, nodes and mass transit, says Ryan, but if developers get their way, “we’ll have

glorified subdivisions leapfrogging one another 20 miles east of Interstate 75 [the former eastern boundary of sprawl], and everyone will be driving in to Naples.”

From Sunshine State to Land of the Air-Conditioned Flea Market

Novelists, historians and journalists have exhausted entire thesauruses in their attempts to capture the exuberance with which Florida has welcomed hordes of diverse new residents and all sorts of zany enterprises for over half a century.

Now, as Ellen Peterson watches what she sees as “developers’ greed” fueling the relentless encroachment on wetlands, she sees a golden goose killing itself: “Without large wetlands to the east, this area won’t be beautiful anymore.” But, I asked her, if the environment that originally attracted people to southwest Florida is largely gone, why do people keep coming? “A lot of people who live here don’t know what it used to be like, so they don’t know what they’re missing,” she says. “Fifteen years ago, just sitting on my porch, I’d hear a symphony of fish every evening, when they were jumping in the Imperial River. Now it’s silent, and it’s all because of development.”

The sun and winter warmth are still there, says Ryan, but not much else is left. “Now this area looks like everywhere else. It’s all one damn strip mall. One intersection on Bonita Beach Road has pharmacies on three of the four corners! Speculation and greed have ruined it here.”

Balmy weather, sand and sea have been bringing people to southwest Florida for decades, but the recipe for perpetual economic growth includes ingredients of a very different kind. The most recent project to take its name from the ecosystem it’s helping to destroy is Naples’ Big Cypress Market, just outside the city’s southern frontier. The vast, bland, metal-and-con-



A Florida vacation used to be like a trip to an exotic foreign country, but today new residents and visitors need not fear homesickness. They can spend increasing numbers of hours each day in air-conditioned houses, offices, stores and restaurants just like those they left back home, and enjoy familiar scenery as they sit through ever-worsening traffic jams

crete structure features an 87,000-square-foot, 300-booth, air-conditioned flea market, mini-winery, performance stage, farmers market and tiki bar.

Maybe sun and fun once were enough to keep people here happy, but, according to Big Cypress Market’s developer, “A lot of people are looking for something other than going to the beach and golfing down here. They go shopping to be entertained to some degree.”

A Florida vacation used to be like a trip to an exotic foreign country, but today new residents and visitors need not fear homesickness. They can spend increasing numbers of hours each day in air-conditioned houses, offices, stores and restaurants just like those they left back home, and enjoy familiar scenery as they sit through ever-worsening traffic jams. Many go for long periods without ever catching a glimpse of a beach, let alone a cypress forest or mangrove swamp.

Meanwhile, developers and environmental planners will continue to haggle over acres of land and gallons of water, more shining-cities-on-the-swamp will be built, and environmental quality of life – as always in the Sunshine State – will be available for sale or barter.

An anecdote related by Michael Grunwald sums up the extent of physical and mental dislocation that growth has inflicted on the region. When, he wrote, a highway extension threatened 1,500 acres of Lee County panther habitat a few years ago, a county commissioner argued the roadbuilder’s case by saying, “Look, we’ve got tens of thousands of people sitting in traffic. That’s not good for the environment either.”

In southwest Florida as in the rest of America, everyone cares about protecting the environment, but no one seems to agree on where to find it.

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